



2025 French-American Foundation Translation Prize

**Finalist Interview with Nicholas Elliott,
translator of *A Life in Letters* by Simone Weil
(The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press)**

Q: What did you enjoy most about translating *A Life in Letters* by Simone Weil?

Nicholas: The joy and challenge of translating Simone Weil was in trying to keep up with the mind of a radically empathetic and inquisitive genius who was equally at ease solving mysteries of Pythagorean geometry, describing Renaissance chapels, chiding Leon Trotsky, and badgering the highest authorities of the Free French to allow her to serve on the frontlines of the fight against Nazism. May her intelligence and moral restlessness guide me for many years.

Q: In addition to being a translator, you've done extensive work in the theater. Are there any similarities between translating text from one language to another, and translating a written narrative into a performance?

Nicholas: Translation and theater-making both require constant interpreting—an effort to understand the material at hand (a text to translate or to speak) in order to best convey its essence to those who will read or witness it. It is perhaps more obvious in performing a text that there is no right or wrong interpretation, but the same is true of the translation. The objective is to get as close to what the translator understands as the author's singularity, knowing that the translated outcome must perforce be equally singular. An acting teacher I knew talked about how moving it was to take on a Shakespearean role and think of all the actors and actresses who had spoken those same words before him. In writing a translation, I'd like to think of all the translators who will write the same but different words after me.



Q: The French-American Foundation Translation Prize seeks to honor translators and their craft, and recognize the important work they do bringing works of French literature to Anglophone audiences. What does being named a finalist for this prize mean to you, and, in your own words, why does a Prize like this matter?

Nicholas: Translation is a lonely business, particularly when one is translating an author no longer living. I enjoy the solitude of my occupation, and the freedom that comes with it, but when the text I'm translating seems as vital as *A Life in Letters*, I yearn to share my enthusiasm in ways that might strain my friends' patience. Being a finalist for this prize makes me feel "read" in the way we now say we feel "seen." Outside of dog shows and horse races, prizes are still awarded primarily to humans, so I appreciate the acknowledgement that the tens of thousands of choices that go into writing a translation must be made by an imperfect but utterly unique person rather than a machine. In a lovely article on Simone Weil published by *The New Yorker* on the occasion of the publication of *A Life in Letters*, my translation was quoted but my name was not mentioned (I blame Condé Nast, not the author Judith Thurman). I thank the French-American Foundation for recognizing our quiet work.